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CIA Proposal Chilling

The Reagan administration is debating whether to issue a presidential order to put the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) back in the domestic spy business. The prospect is chilling.

The administration is drafting an order to let the CIA put under surveillance, burglarize and/or infiltrate Americans and U.S. corporations to gather whatever information it thinks might be useful. Neither the people nor the companies targeted would have to be suspected of crimes or of being foreign agents. In very plain English, the United States would have its very own secret police.

Ostensibly the White House is concerned about summer terrorism; perhaps more to the point are the reports that the White House and CIA seek access to financial data accumulated by multinational corporations and want a surefire means of tracking down embarrassing news leaks. (We'd be tempted to classify the Associated Press story about the proposed order as such a leak, except that the story's widespread dissemination suggests a trial balloon.)

Regardless, no free society can tolerate a secret police force, secretly funded, spying on its citizens and businesses and

extracting official revenge for whatever misdeeds it decides have been committed.

The corruption of the CIA by the Nixon administration for its own political purposes fully justified congressional attempts to check the agency and require some accountability from it. Those reins should not be loosened in response to phony charges from the extreme right wing that the agency can't do its job if forced to respect the constitutional rights of American citizens.

The FBI — openly funded and restrained by the Constitution and courts — legally is charged with investigating domestic espionage and coping with terrorism if and when it occurs. If the FBI needs to be beefed up with additional manpower, that is a proper budgetary exercise; if the CIA should be tipping the FBI that foreign spies are enroute to or have entered this country, that is a proper subject of executive order.

It is a totally improper executive order which seeks to transfer the FBI mandate to the CIA, which by its charter is forbidden to engage in domestic spying.

That such an order even is being entertained is utterly frightening.